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# Searching for 'a third space': a creative pathway towards international PhD students' academic acculturation

Dely Lazarte Elliot, Vivienne Baumfield & Kate Reid

## Abstract

Undertaking a PhD is a challenging endeavour. Pursuing a doctoral education in a 'foreign' context tends to increase the demands of this intellectual venture. The nature of research-based PhD programmes, often characterised by a lack of formal curricula where academic supervision lasts several years, may add another layer of complexity. Drawing upon an extended version of Urie Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory of human development, this paper attempts to offer a greater understanding of both academic and non-academic concerns confronting international PhD students with a view to highlighting their implications for institutional policy and practice. Underpinned by a visual metaphor approach, our research findings advocate embedding the use of 'a third space' as a creative pathway and strategy for maximising students' chances of achieving a successful PhD academic acculturation journey.

**Keywords:** PhD experience; international students; academic acculturation; third space; intercultural education; academic literacy, visual metaphor, creative qualitative approach

## Introduction

### *International PhD as a complex endeavour*

The complexity entailed by an international PhD journey is widely acknowledged in the literature (for example, Acker & Haque, 2015; Brydon & Fleming, 2011; Cotterall, 2010; Fotovatian, 2012; Sakurai, Pyhältö, Lindblom-Ylläne, 2012; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). It seems that differing regional and institutional characteristics of PhD programmes play a crucial role in students' overall experience – at times also contributing more complexity to an already challenging endeavour.

One view of doctoral education begins with a pervasive tendency to view traditional PhD students as an elite cohort (Acker & Haque, 2015; Wright, 2003), who are perhaps bestowed with intellectual prowess as they pursue highly specialised and in-depth scholarship on a chosen topic. Doctoral studies is available only through competitive scholarships or through self-funding, reinforcing the notion that either route is arguably a luxury open only to a few. Setting this perception or misperception aside, the PhD experience in the United Kingdom (also in Europe, Australia and New Zealand) is generally characterised by a professional and personal developmental process comprising an independent learning route in most cases without prescribed formal curricula. PhD candidates are instead given two or three supervisors who provide intellectual guidance, instructional and some pastoral support (Walsh, 2010; Wright, 2003). At each stage, students and supervisors choose the PhD training schemes, workshops and seminars that are worth pursuing. The culmination of the entire PhD experience – lasting for three years or longer, takes the form of a

*viva voce* – typically described as the most stressful part of the process that is ‘shrouded in mystery’ (Johnston, 1997, as cited in Brydon & Fleming 2011, p. 1006). Alongside PhD candidates’ core objective of typically producing independent and high quality scholarly research that genuinely contributes to knowledge, there is little doubt that the process is exceptionally challenging and intellectually demanding (Cotterall, 2013; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). The nature of the PhD necessitates the cultivation of a critical, analytical and reflective way of thinking and research orientation, during this conventionally long and often isolated endeavour (Walsh, 2010). Brydon and Fleming (2011) argue that the PhD experience is ‘unique’ and is ‘shared with the supervisor’ to an extent, but is frequently ‘a solo journey’ (p. 1008) – a journey fraught with unanticipated challenges. A metaphor for the complexity and difficulty of the PhD trajectory is captured below:

Undertaking postgraduate research is neither a single event nor a single project. It is akin to a long journey fraught with twists and turns, with few defined signposts and the need to constantly adapt to unexpected events. (Brydon & Fleming, 2011, p. 996)

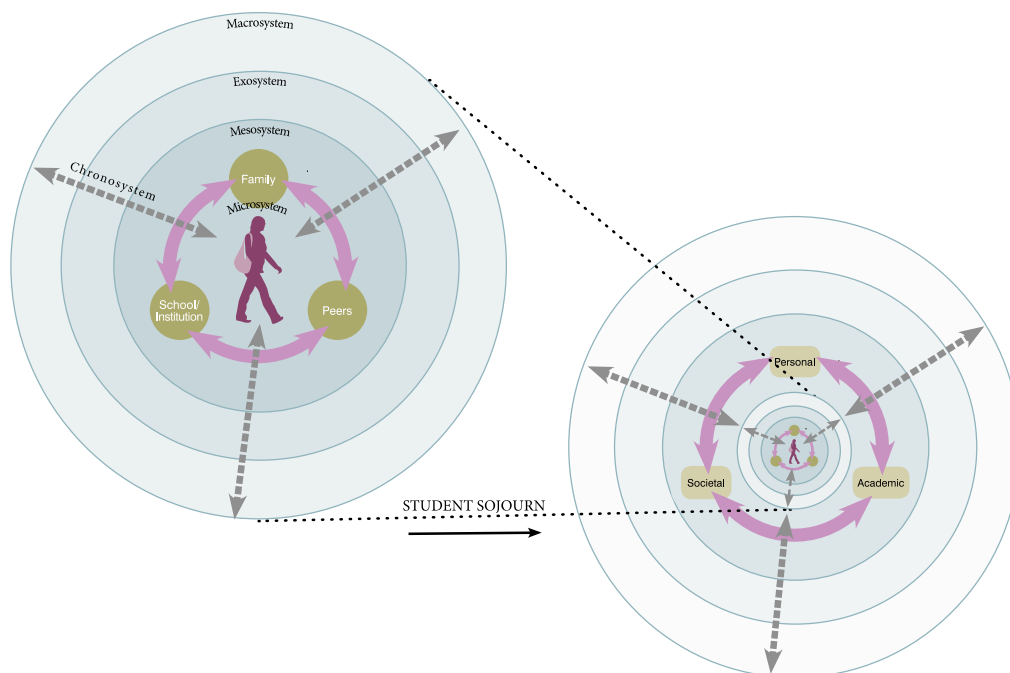
The PhD can appear to be an unmapped journey; what takes place in between is frequently ambiguous and open to numerous possibilities (Gardner, 2007). Yet, the expectations are high – the journey is marked by the implicit training and critical groundwork involved in becoming a member of the academic community – also referred to as ‘academic rites of passage’ (Amran & Ibrahim, 2012, p. 528). Needless to say, the doctoral study is a demanding, even nerve-racking journey (Gardner, 2007; Walsh, 2010). At times, the attrition rate for doctoral students is a cause for concern demanding further attention (Sakurai, et al., 2012; Trafford & Leshem, 2009; Wright, 2003).

On top of this, there seems to be a concealed extra layer of complexity in international PhD study. The United Kingdom (UK) is in an advantageous position for attracting international students owing to its internationally recognised academic systems (Kemp & Lawton, 2013) and use of English, the international language. This leads to the UK having its fair share of international students. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency Student Record 2012/13, of 2,340,275 students, 425,265 (i.e. 18%) were international students. Of the international cohort, 188,975 were postgraduate students – 149,035 were Master’s degree students and 39,940 were Doctoral students (all forms). Among the international doctoral cohort, the complexity of the doctoral experience is arguably exacerbated by the added dimension stemming from sociocultural distinctions, i.e. with reference to the ‘institutional, cultural and historical specificity of mental functioning’ (Wright, 2003, p. 223) between the students’ home and host countries. In this connection, it mandates an in-depth appreciation of the major challenges facing international PhD students. In doing so, we can learn from those who have not only experienced the journey but have also successfully completed and integrated into British academia.

### **Theoretical framework**

In our research, we employed the Bio-Ecological Systems Theory proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994, 2005) as a way of understanding holistically the notion of human development. This developmental theory emphasises how a

person's unique and active interactions within the layered multi-systems – the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem – significantly affect one's growth and development. The child/individual is situated at the very core of the microsystem from where close and direct interactions with one's environment (e.g. family, school, workplace) initially happen; further interactions among the constituents within the microsystem then form the mesosystem. Although it is suggested that the quality of the direct interactions within the two inner systems exerts a remarkable influence on a child's/individual's development, further significant growth and development outwith the microsystem and mesosystem continue to occur. The child's/individual's parents' workplace, social network, community (situated in the exosystem) and the wider culture and subculture (located in the macrosystem) essentially comprising 'the belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs, lifestyles, opportunity structures, hazards, and life course options that are embedded in each of these broader systems' (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40) influence the child/individual in a distinct way. The cultural knowledge and beliefs, in particular, thoroughly permeate the other systems, and are primarily responsible for shaping a child's/individual's national identity. Bronfenbrenner (1994) refers to this as 'a societal blueprint'. Bronfenbrenner also includes a dimension specific to the time element within the person's development: temporal milestones such as changes in the family structure, marital status and employment among other things (i.e. the chronosystem). Within this framework 'the principle of interconnectedness' is applied 'within settings' as well as to 'linkages between settings' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 7). Taken together, the multi-layered and multi-dimensional components of the theory and its emphasis on the cultural contributions to human development make it more fitting for cross-cultural or intercultural studies. We contend that these concepts have greater relevance for the psychological introspection of international students whose study sojourn triggers an alteration of sociocultural conventions, norms, practices and social support, among others.



*Figure 1. An academic acculturation model based on Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory.*

In the light of our research findings, we offer an extension to Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Systems Theory to help elucidate the seemingly complex incidences experienced not only by PhD students but by all student sojourners as they temporarily move to an environment with a different societal culture, academic systems, language(s), and even weather, thereby necessitating transitions at multiple levels (Elliot et al., 2015). In Figure 1, we explain that:

Following Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994, 2005), each student on a sojourn constitutes their own multilevel ecological system – their accepted norm prior to contact with a new ecological system. The sojourn instigates disruption at all levels, as the sojourner becomes part of another ecological system, severely affecting the person's principal sources of support, for example, previously sustained relationships with significant others (microsystem, mesosystem). Likewise, the person's sense of identity achieved through relations with the macrosystem (e.g. national and cultural values, religious, and political affiliation) and displayed through social behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) is somewhat disturbed. The sojourn itself is a decontextualising tool, facilitating reflection beyond what used to be the sojourners' norm.... (Elliot et al., 2015)

Moreover, this extended multilevel bio-ecological perspective is also instrumental in securing a deeper understanding of the notions 'enculturation' and 'acculturation' in relation to international education. While enculturation refers to the acquisition of the first culture from the original ecological system, acculturation is indicative of the learning of appropriate behaviour in a new culture (He, 2002, p. 323). The enculturation versus acculturation dichotomy poses challenges to students whose learning involves them moving to a different social and cultural setting. Thoughts, language and common practices conceived through original exposure to the home culture for many years, i.e. enculturation,

are likely to have been deeply embedded within the student's psyche, and thus, consciously and subconsciously persist despite a change of physical and cultural environment. Tensions potentially arise when the necessity to conform to the norms of the new environment, compels personal introspection in order to learn, unlearn or re-learn new ideas, thoughts and behaviours, i.e. acculturation, in order to survive and flourish in the new setting.

This existing dichotomy helps explain the reasoning behind the challenges related to linguistic and cultural adjustment and also for the reported sense of isolation, strangeness, loneliness, 'foreignness' and alienation customarily experienced by international students (Fischbacher-Smith et al., 2015; Fotovatian, 2012; He, 2002; Sakurai, Pyhältö, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Walsh, 2010). As a case in point, Sawir and her colleagues (2008, p. 148) undertook a major study of international student security and reported different facets of loneliness: personal, social and cultural. Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia (2008) clarify 'personal loneliness' to be emanating from students losing contact with families back home and 'social loneliness' is triggered by the loss of previous networks. The third facet, i.e. 'cultural loneliness', is caused by 'the absence of the preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment', which can also intensify experiences of personal and social loneliness and lead to cultural assimilation difficulties. As Fischbacher-Smith et al. (2015, p. 7) argue, we contend that the acculturation process itself is challenging as it requires students 'to reconcile complex emotional, social and academic pressures and opportunities often feeling bewildered by the choices they face, uncertain about the consequences of the choices they make and frequently retreating and so increasing their social isolation'. Unfamiliarity with the new contexts and systems tends to challenge (even disorientate or diminish) one's knowledge, self-assurance, and confidence.

### **The study**

The participants were fourteen non-British postdoctoral academics employed by a research-intensive institution in the UK (belonging to the Russell Group) in 2013-14. Employing purposive sampling, the University's Research Development Officer circulated an e-mail to postdoctoral academics in this institution (with the project website link outlining the research objectives, processes, participation criteria, and the team's contact details). The e-mail was an invitation for all potential participants to consider participating in our research. This also afforded them the opportunity to check our academic interests and to learn that two of the authors' passion for intercultural education was inspired by first-hand experience of studying abroad and involvement in internationalisation activities. Coming from wide-ranging disciplines, participants had completed their PhD education in a British institution between 2008 and 2013. See Table 1 for the participants' demographic profile. The study's strong emphasis on the phenomenological 'lived experience' (Giorgi & Giorgi 2008, p. 29) of the international PhD student journey, through participants' reflection during the postdoctoral stage, necessitated a technique that could help stimulate and strengthen participants' recollection of their experiential journey. It was considered appropriate to employ a visual metaphor approach, which is widely used in sociology and increasingly used in education and psychology (Baumfield,

Hall, & Wall, 2013; Reavey, 2011) to generate in-depth, reflective and personal meaning of the experiences to the participants during their PhD study. This comprised a two-tiered approach: 1) giving participants a disposable camera to capture visual representations reflecting their educational experiences, and then, 2) utilising participants' self-selected photographs as stimuli for the interviews.

Table 1. Participants' profile (n=14).

	Geographical region	College	Family status	Age starting PhD	In UK prior to PhD
Faith	Western Europe	Arts	Single	25 or less	1 month
Helena	Eastern Europe	Social Sciences	Single	25 or less	1 year, 6 months
Ella	North America	Social Sciences	In a relationship <sup>^</sup>	25 or less	1 year
Nigel	Western Europe	MVLS*	In a relationship	25 or less	2 years, 10 months
Oscar	East Asia	MVLS	Single	25 or less	5 years, 5 months
Piers	West Africa	MVLS	Single	31 to 35	1 year, 3 months
Ophelia	Central Asia	Science & Engineering	Single	25 or less	2 days
Kelly	South East Asia	Science & Engineering	In a relationship	25 or less	2 days
Calum	South Asia	Science & Engineering	Single	25 or less	1 year, 8 months
Nancy	Western Europe	Social Sciences	In a relationship	31 to 35	11 years
Norah	East Asia	University services+	Single	26 to 30	1 year
Toby	South Asia	Science & Engineering	In a relationship	25 or less	3 months
Nadine	South America	Arts	In a relationship	26 to 30	1 year, 9 months
Oliver	South East Asia	Science & Engineering	In a relationship	26 to 30	6 years

<sup>^</sup> Includes being married or non-married relationships

\* Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences

+ The unit is not a part of any of the colleges

With the use of NVivo software, an inductive data analysis approach, i.e. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) that is apt for phenomenological studies was then employed (Smith & Osborn 2008). Initially, emergent themes from the same three transcripts were independently generated by two researchers who agreed on a catalogue of preliminary themes. The transcripts were then systematically and rigorously analysed, each transcript being read several times using these themes as initial codes. The final list of codes generated after the coding analysis was completed led to the identification of the most salient (or superordinate) themes (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin 2005; Smith & Osborn 2008), for which corresponding photographs were identified. Verbatim interview data and photographic data from the fourteen participants were employed complementarily to report final emergent themes surrounding the International PhD students' journey.

Whereas ethics permeate overall research design and methods, there are extra layers of complexity when employing image-based approaches (Mitchell, 2011) due to the distinct challenges inherent within visual research methods. This study was scrutinised by the College of Social Sciences' Ethics Committee. The research team carefully followed the research protocols in relation to clarity and transparency, voluntariness, anonymity and consent, and avoidance of harm, among others. Despite the researchers' best efforts, there remain complexities and tensions in qualitative research concerning confidentiality and anonymity, more so when images are used (Reavey, 2011). Heeding the advice of Wiles,



Clark & Prosser (2011, p. 699), our team adopted the 'ethics of care' approach, i.e. our actions were underpinned by 'care', 'compassion' and 'benefit' towards the group that was the focus of our research. We strongly concur that improving ethical awareness of 'grey areas', e.g. inability to seek consent, copyright ownership of images (Mitchell, 2011; Wiles, Clark, & Prosser, 2011) requires further consideration.

### **Key academic and non-academic concerns**

Elsewhere, we discussed the general phenomenological academic acculturation experienced by the student sojourners in our study; these findings led us to propose that a comprehensive understanding of academic acculturation required examination of experiential aspects beyond academia.

In this connection, this paper reports on the three major challenges that the participants – as international doctoral students – encountered. As they sought 'third space' as a primary coping mechanism, this also highlighted the strong interconnection among the personal, social and academic elements of the challenges they faced. Therefore, addressing these challenges contributed not only to managing their academic but also their personal and societal acculturation experience.

### ***A dual sense of loneliness***

As informed by the bio-ecological perspective, culture, society, family and friends are recognised not only as key influences but factors that govern human growth and developmental processes at a wider level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994). Since family and close peers reside within the very core of the ecological systems, it explains and highlights the fundamental importance of social relationships to individuals' development, encompassing intellectual and psychological qualities. With the tendency for fewer social encounters, it is easier to understand why a research-based PhD study can be a lonely journey, and an international PhD even lonelier. Doctoral students' often isolated research work under the supervision of typically two academics for approximately four years with little coursework interaction in the form of occasional workshops and seminars makes the nature of the PhD 'a solitary affair' (Cotterall, 2013, p. 180).

In our study, a few spoke about the loneliness inherent in the nature of academic work or loneliness arising from a natural yearning to be with people with whom they have meaningful relationships.

In the middle of the second year of my PhD I was feeling just really kind of enclosed in. ... I had friends [in the department], but you just felt that that was the only thing I was doing at all times. ... It was starting to feel really quite lonely. ... I was working in a library at night ... so I never saw anyone and I only knew fellow students. (Ella)

[PhD experience] felt lonely. I didn't have friends ... apart from my dog ... a puppy ... became my baby, my friend, my everything ... especially when I was writing my thesis ... I talked to my mum, I talked to my supervisors and I talked to my dog, that's it – these three. (Ophelia)



*Figure 2. A lonely birthday.*

Ophelia also selected a photograph to commemorate a birthday held on the Royal Yacht Britannia (see Figure 2). However, the photograph is a reference to a 'lonely birthday' because despite the lavish setting, her significant people were not there to join the celebration. International students' symbolic longing to connect with their families back home is typical and as a case in point is figuratively captured in Faith's photograph of a post box. Even though it is no longer common practice to write letters, Faith explains that taking this photograph 'symbolised the connection to home'.

### ***Linguistic challenges and differing academic traditions***

Another factor uniting international students' experience is the common use of English. In writing a PhD thesis, 'intense writing' is obligatory. Since English is rarely the international students' mother tongue, learning in English tends to bring forth multiple challenges – from deciphering accents, nuances, and meaning to ensuring clarity of the ideas expressed. Toby explained the extra effort he had to put in when communicating with English speakers; compared to his mother tongue, understanding English did not come easily. Several participants took a photograph of their theses to indicate more than a celebratory gesture of their academic achievement. Nigel's account exemplifies the double difficulty resulting from undertaking a PhD in another language.

You know all about [writing a PhD thesis], workload, stress, deadlines to meet, should I write about this, should I not, [but] it's the writing in a different language as well which is a significant part of the task. ... Because it's difficult, not natural and therefore it's an achievement and also it's significant in terms of workload, it adds to the task. My [supervisor] spent ... time correcting my English, my grammar, my spelling.... (Nigel)

Participants stressed that part of the difficulty in writing – which at times, led to embarrassment, frustration or humiliation (Cotterall, 2013; He, 2002) – comes from the differing academic orientations, prompting international students to adjust to the host institutions' academic writing conventions. In South East Asia, many countries are still in transition 'moving from what is quite rote-based to one that encourages critical thinking' (Oliver). Coming from East Asia, apart from moving away from a descriptive style of writing, Norah had to exercise care not to be accused of 'plagiarism' – stealing other people's thoughts, ideas or expressions through inadvertent misrepresentation of other's people work as her own. Even a student from a neighbouring Western European country pointed out how 'learning how to write academically' was lacking in her home country's academic tradition. According to Brydon and Fleming (2011), academic writing represents a steep learning curve as it is often 'a departure from an acquired style of constructing and disseminating written material'; academic writing needs to capture the story behind the research journey, demonstrate that ethics requirements and the rigours of research were satisfied while 'presenting a thesis that is able to engage the reader/examiner' (p. 1004).

Conversely, exposure to a new academic culture does not always lead to academic pressure. International students appreciated the many positive attributes characterising British academia, particularly the overall guidance received from supervisors. Participants commented on British academics being 'very passionate' with their research (Ophelia); having a deeper understanding of their roles as academics (Nadine); greatly valuing academic dialogue and academic writing (Faith, Nigel), and who were 'approachable', 'down-to-earth', 'very hands on', encouraging a relaxed, less conservative attitude and a personal relationship with students (Piers, Oscar, Toby, Kelly, Helena). Oscar stressed how empowering it was to be in an academic atmosphere devoid of the 'more disciplined and strict ... old-fashioned hierarchical structure' strongly preserved in Japanese academia.

### ***Challenges related to social connections and relationships***

In our study, nine participants commenced their PhD when they were '25 or less', three when they were '26 to 30' and two when they were '31 to 35' years of age. The period between ages 20 and 40, generally regarded as the 'young adult stage' in Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development (Woolfolk, Hughes, & Walkup 2013), is regarded as a period when young adults long to develop intimate relationships. Unsurprisingly, half of the participants were 'in a relationship', with four of them marking the beginning of settling down or starting a family.

...the PhD ... saw the end and the beginning of two relationships. Certainly I was very puzzled about how all that stuff was supposed to work. Stuff about when you're with someone, in love and then the things that you expect don't quite happen .... So for me, I left that relationship and thinking okay now is the time to focus on work and then somebody else comes along and you go surely this is the worst possible time to start a new relationship ... I found it all very puzzling. (Oliver)

I got pregnant while I was doing my PhD. ... What I wanted to do was have a baby right at the end of my PhD like with one month left because you don't know how you will feel

after a baby is there and you don't know whether you'll feel like going back to studying .... Anyway he came earlier than we thought he would ... so we were ... a bit horrified when we found out ... that's not something planned.... (Nancy)

At the end of the first year of my PhD I gave birth to my first son, so that made my PhD, I think, more challenging than your average PhD ... but the university was good ... because I had the university nursery place when he was four months old ... I had to leave work every lunch time to breastfeed him and ... when I [was] at work ... doing my experiment, I would have to stop and express milk .... (Kelly)



*Figure 3. A baby during my PhD.*

Apart from romantic relationships and parenthood (see Figure 3), other social relationships formed or social incidents encountered during the PhD students' time abroad also left a deep impression on their educational journey. It might be a scarring racist incident experienced by Norah while fundraising for the Red Cross immediately after her country was hit by an earthquake or the 'eternal gratitude' Calum felt towards his supervisor who went the extra mile to arrange for him a stipend of £500 per month for one-and-a half years, affording him time to 'publish papers rather than stack shelves' in a supermarket. Helena's account of her supervisor was profoundly devastating as this person who mentored, guided and became a good friend died unexpectedly after a brief illness (see Figure 4):

[my supervisor] had a huge influence on me and I really miss him because he died before I finished my PhD ... that was very sad and in a way, I'm trying not to think about my PhD that much ... it doesn't have to do with academia really. It's just personal experiences. (Helena)

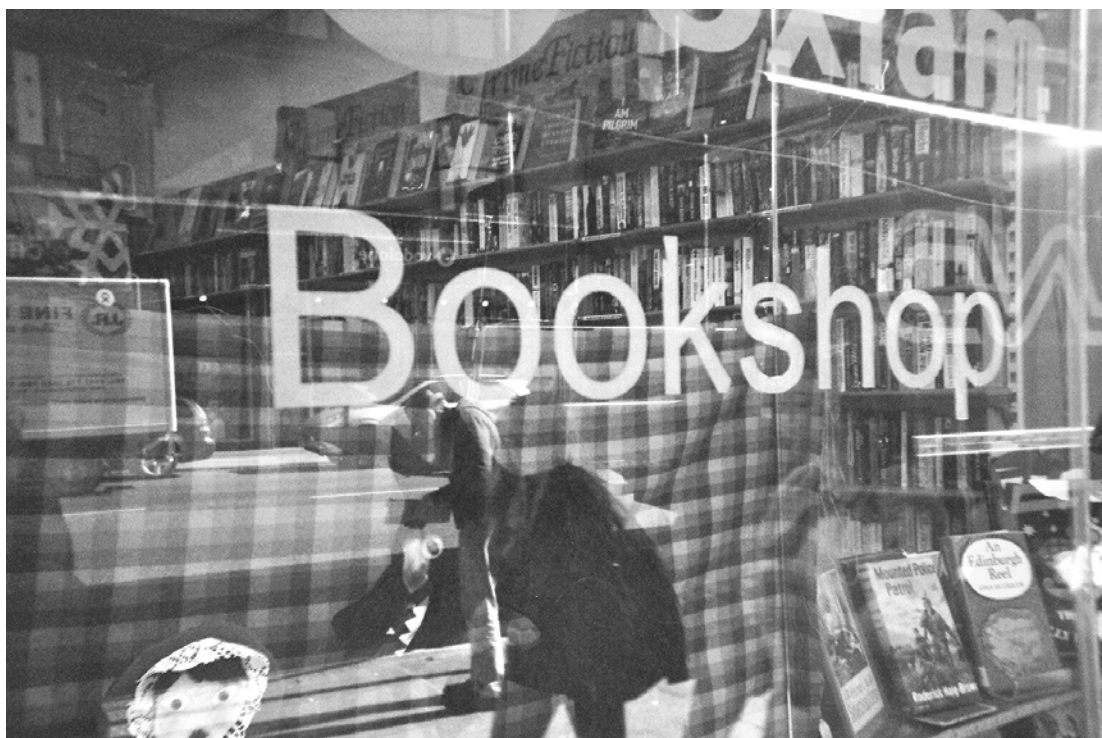


*Figure 4. My supervisor and me.*

Like Helena, many of the participants considered some of their significant experiences to be something outwith academia. The varying experiences that they were presented with are not only challenging but enriching; they show that international PhD study is far from being a 'monolithic enterprise' (Gardner 2007, p. 729). Whereas people around them are a great source of support, certain social encounters nevertheless create their own challenges. Needless to say, restricted family and peer support in times of adversity in the case of student sojourners can make coping even harder.

### ***Creative use of the third space as a coping mechanism***

Loosely based on Skerrett's (2010) conceptualisation of the 'third space', the space that is neither family-orientated nor educational nor work-orientated, but a space for relaxation and recreation that engages learners and scaffolds their learning is referred to as the 'third space'. In our study, 'third space' refers to the informal spaces that foster personal learning, enjoyment and development through friendships, social activities and wider support networks. Our successful international PhD students referred to the diverse activities they proactively pursued outside PhD life, to seek purposeful social interactions with local people and so converting day-to-day activities into something 'intercultural' as well as educational, enjoyable and socially rewarding (see Figures 5 and 6 as examples).



*Figure 5. Volunteering in a charity bookshop.*

I was walking home past an Amnesty International bookshop ... I went in ... and I ended up volunteering there for two years.... It was a kind of place to stop feeling insane ... I got to talk to people ... they ranged age 18 to 90. ... there was some great stories ... every single day, I usually worked about one day a week ... about eight hours a week but sometimes more than that if I ... needed ... to be somewhere else interacting with people, not having to think about my dissertation, just feeling pretty good. It was nice. (Ella)

This is my home pub ... almost every day after work I went to the Whey Pat Tavern and had a couple of pints and then at that place I got to know some of the local people ... they accepted me as one of the regulars, so that was a very heartwarming place for me ... somebody is [always] there and we then have a bit of a chat ... one of them is like my [British] father ... and he treated me as his son. (Oscar)

I took a picture here of a tennis court (See Figure 6)... I played tennis and I felt that continuing to do this in a foreign country ... is part of being accustomed to life here, meeting people, being part of tournaments and competitions ... but that wasn't really my experience of the university institution. The two are linked anyway, I still find it difficult to differentiate [between] the two.... (Nigel)



*Figure 6. Playing tennis.*

Ten out of the fourteen participants disclosed proactively searching for their personal area(s) for growth and development or 'a third space'. Other examples included going to sports clubs, looking after young children, and joining a choir. They conveyed how their creative use of the 'third space' strategically served many different purposes. Firstly, participants gained intercultural competence through interactions with local people. Intercultural competence is defined as '[a] dynamic, ongoing, interactive self-reflective learning process that transforms attitudes, skills and knowledge for effective communication and interaction across cultures and contexts (Freeman et al., 2009, as cited in Leask, 2015, p. 64). This aided deeper appreciation of local life, e.g. how various systems operate in the host country. Secondly, for some, these conversations offered practical opportunities for improving their command of English, understanding the nuances of jokes and idioms, increasing their confidence to express their thoughts, even entering into friendly arguments and debates. Thirdly, through socialisation with local people meaningful relationships were formed, which offered a supportive bond and counteracted the social and academic-related loneliness of doing a PhD. Altogether, they regarded finding 'a third space' a strategic acculturative tool.

Nevertheless, the third space can also be a neutral place, i.e. the public library, where Calum regularly went simply to read books for enjoyment. It is noteworthy to stress that what worked for Oscar was deemed 'awkward' for Oliver and Toby; this suggests that in selecting a 'third space', one's particular interests and preferences or religious orientations need to be accommodated.

I do remember that evening it was after we had gone caving ... it was great and we went to a pub ... someone went to the bar and bought a round and people just stood around

talking and I found it really contrived ... and the topics of conversation just alien to me ... I couldn't make out some of the accents ... after that, it was no thanks. (Oliver)

I don't drink alcohol at all and I am a bit uncomfortable just around it. ... I go to bars ... but ... I'm not in my comfort zone in those kinds of social situations. (Toby)

## Discussion and conclusion

As demonstrated in the extended Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological framework, the theorisation of the study sojourn highlighted the necessity to look beyond formal academic support systems within the university when addressing the plight of international students. This is mainly because students' academic needs are often intertwined with personal and social needs. A metaphor from Williams and Daborn (2008) with respect to international students' transition to a new educational environment clearly conveys the message: international students are likened to seasoned cricket players who are still applying the rules of cricket even though they are now playing football – a completely different game! Unsurprisingly, it causes confusion, puzzlement and eventually disappointment. Accordingly, the 'real problem' with international students is not so much about lack of motivation or cognitive competence – often camouflaged by poor linguistic ability – but that they use 'the wrong approach'! They need *not just* to recognise but to learn, even master, the *new rules* of the *new game*, while taking advantage of available university support provision, if their aim is to have a good chance of winning, i.e. successful completion. There is potentially another hindrance even when students make a great effort to improve academic literacy, that of time. As Braine (2002, p. 63) asserts: academic literacy is 'generally acquired over an extended period of time in a complex, dynamic manner ... from multiple sources'. Arguably, this is where international PhD students are at an advantage compared to one-year programme Postgraduate Taught students; PhD students are afforded more time and scope to learn and perfect the 'rules' by equipping themselves with appropriate academic competencies and then applying newly learned mechanics of learning.

What can we learn from the highly successful international PhD students' trajectories using the bio-ecological perspective as a lens? This cohort who not only completed their PhDs but also secured an academic post in a Russell Group institution highlighted the scope offered by their 'third space' for establishing social connections, offsetting loneliness, and enhancing intercultural competence. Further, as demonstrated by some participants, their 'third space' afforded meaningful learning (e.g. improving linguistic competence) through very informal contexts. Also critical to this discourse is the increasing importance placed on academic staff's (and local students') reflection on their values, beliefs and practices, as part of recognising classroom diversity and the 'valuable resource bank of transcultural wisdom in the group' (Bennett, 2004; Leask, 2015, p. 93). Leask (2015) posits educators' key role: 'to create bridges between students from different backgrounds, to stimulate engagement and reflection' (p. 93); arguably, this applies to international doctoral students, too, and directly addresses the 'deficit model' in international education, i.e. students' sense of isolation and disempowerment (Leask, 2015, p. 92). Taken together, our research findings suggest that beyond the simplistic notion of 'culture and/or



learning' shock traditionally ascribed to international students, there are deeper issues constituting the international PhD experience, in particular. Such issues should arguably prompt careful reflection towards aligning institutional support and provision to the core issues facing international students.

Whereas institutions are not expected to address directly all the concerns of their students, they can pay greater attention to establishing mechanisms that are aimed at encouraging international PhD students to become more proactive in considering non-conventional resources that are within their reach, e.g. 'a third space', which, can complement already established more formal provision, e.g. colloquia and seminars for the doctoral community. As Bengtsen (forthcoming) argues, the resources and support systems from which doctoral students can draw – both formally and informally – come in different forms, shapes and sizes. In addition to the learning support given to international students via social interaction, i.e. encouragement, guidance, support and feedback, there is increased attention given to intercultural sensitivity and meaningful interaction arising from student diversity (Bennett, 2004; Leask, 2015; Williams & Daborn, 2008) leading to induction courses for international students tailored towards managing their expectations of studying in another academic and sociocultural setting (Kobayashi & Ulriksen, personal communication, August 21, 2015). Likewise, the supervisors' role is critical and should not be overlooked. The supervisory bond is one that nurtures learning, builds capacity and confidence, criticises constructively and creates a safe environment as students undertake independent research (Cotterall, 2013). Very often, supervisors' work also has a degree of 'pastoral care' (Wright, 2003).

Nevertheless, we argue that international PhD students' complete reliance on the varying support provision offered by the university, albeit essential, is inadequate. Instead, in managing old and new ecological systems, proactivity is critical; therefore, searching for 'a third space' should not be seen as an option or an alternative but a complementary tool. In so doing, consideration of students' personal interests and preferences is critical to prevent feelings of indifference and instead, maximise its potential benefit. Searching for 'a third space' is a demonstration of what the bio-ecological perspective highlights, i.e. international students themselves play a crucial role in achieving successful academic acculturation during 'ecological transitions' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 6). Bronfenbrenner (2005) maintains that the person (i.e. the international student) remains 'an active agent' regardless of the ecological systems in which they operate. Arguably, searching for 'a third space' is also a good reminder for anyone who is challenged when confronting 'difference' that the most advantageous response is not by retreating into ethnocentrism, i.e. regarding 'one's own culture as "central to reality"' (Bennett, 2004, p. 62), but through a dialogic engagement.

Finally, international (and local) doctoral students are experts in the making. Institutions can capitalise on what these individuals have to offer firstly to the community of scholars and secondly to the people around them (local students, other locals). Drawing from the extended Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological perspective and the evidence from the highly successful international PhD

participants themselves, we contend that there is value in institutions supporting initiatives for students to discover other avenues, whether pursuing a personal interest, participating in activities, mingling with other people and therefore, using their 'third space' creatively in an effort to integrate themselves into the day-to-day life of the host country. Although, it might be more beneficial first to facilitate meetings with students from the same or similar cultures/geographical regions, at least initially, in order to address the 'cultural loneliness' and give them a sense of comfort and a safety zone, we strongly believe that it should not end there. Facilitating contact towards informal socialisation with local people is more advantageous. Even the least formal human interaction is arguably a valuable component in the learning space that promotes human connections and interactions, and in turn, cultivates a holistic, interculturally enriched experience from which everyone – both local and international – can benefit!

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